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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) extends its condolences to the people of Sudan on the death of First Vice President Dr. John Garang. Dr. Garang, with whom the Commission met in the past, was a key figure in negotiating an end to Sudan's 23-year-long North/South Civil War, in which religion had been an important factor.

Since the inauguration of Sudan's Government of National Unity on July 9, Dr. Garang had been engaged in the complex process of integrating his Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement into Sudan's new national and regional political structures and in beginning the work of preparing Southern Sudan for a popular referendum on independence in six years time. Dr. Garang was a voice for fair treatment for all of Sudan's marginalized peoples, including most recently the Muslim Africans of Darfur who have been subjected to genocide by the ruling elite in Khartoum.

In light of the loss of Dr. Garang, the Commission believes more than ever that U.S. leadership is crucial for peace for Sudan. In order to ensure that peace, stability, and reconciliation are achieved in Sudan, the Commission continues to recommend that the U.S. government:

- Remain engaged at the highest levels in bringing about a just and lasting peace for all of Sudan;
- Support a strong international presence in Darfur with adequate strength and mandate to protect civilians from atrocities by government forces and government-backed militia; and
- Continue efforts to aid Darfur's civilian population, including by seeking an end to ethnic cleansing and to Sudanese government impediments to international humanitarian assistance; assist Darfurian refugees and internally displaced persons to return home in safety; and promote a peaceful and just resolution of the crisis.

"The Commission is convinced that U.S. leadership and sustained engagement are necessary to make peace in Sudan a reality, and that respect for human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, is crucial to securing lasting peace," said USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie. "No other government or outside agency is better placed than the United States to assist the Sudanese in developing their indigenous capacity to protect and promote human rights in the six-year transitional period during which they will draft a new permanent constitution and prepare for a popular referendum on the future of the South. Without such U.S. leadership, Sudan is likely to witness yet more massive human tragedy, to serve as a breeding ground for international terrorism, and to engender regional instability and conflict."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie
- Felice D. Gaer